

How many newspaper articles or news stories have we all seen about non-intended firearm-related deaths or injuries? As I reflected on these, I realized all of them could have been prevented if only safety rules and common sense had been used. For Air Force personnel, safety guidelines can be found in Air Force Instruction 31-207, *Arming and Use of Force*, and Air Force Manual 31-229, *USAF Weapons Handling Manual*. Following are a few tips to help with the common sense that's needed.

First and foremost, treat all weapons as if they are loaded ... at all times! Everyone should always assume every firearm is loaded, whether stored in the armory or being used in a training environment, at work, or at home. You must pay attention to what you are doing when handling a gun. There are a lot of elements involved in always treating a weapon as if it were loaded.

For example, always keep a weapon pointed in a safe direction. If you do it all the time, it becomes a habit and will become the only way you know to handle a weapon. I have often heard people say we should only point our weapons at things we intend to shoot, but what happens if you are in a classroom training environment? While no one intends to shoot the walls or ceiling, we usually point our guns at these "targets" instead of other people in the classroom. We must look at each situation and point our weapons at whatever will cause the least amount of damage. It is much easier to explain a hole in a clearing barrel than in another person — although neither is acceptable!

Get to know a weapon before you ever touch it! Just because you might be an expert on one weapon does not mean you are an expert on all weapons. Learn the characteristics, capabilities, limitations, and safety features of each weapon you handle. Each weapon has different operational factors. A BB gun can cause serious injury if not handled properly!

If your weapon is not actually loaded for duty or hunting, then you should constantly "clear" it. Clearing means nothing more than checking the safety



and ensuring no ammunition is present. I personally believe failure to do this is one of the biggest causes of incidents. Think about it, if you know your firearm is not loaded and you keep it pointed in a safe direction, how can it be used to injure others? But you hear it all the time: "I thought it was unloaded." Bottom line: unloaded weapons cannot be fired!!

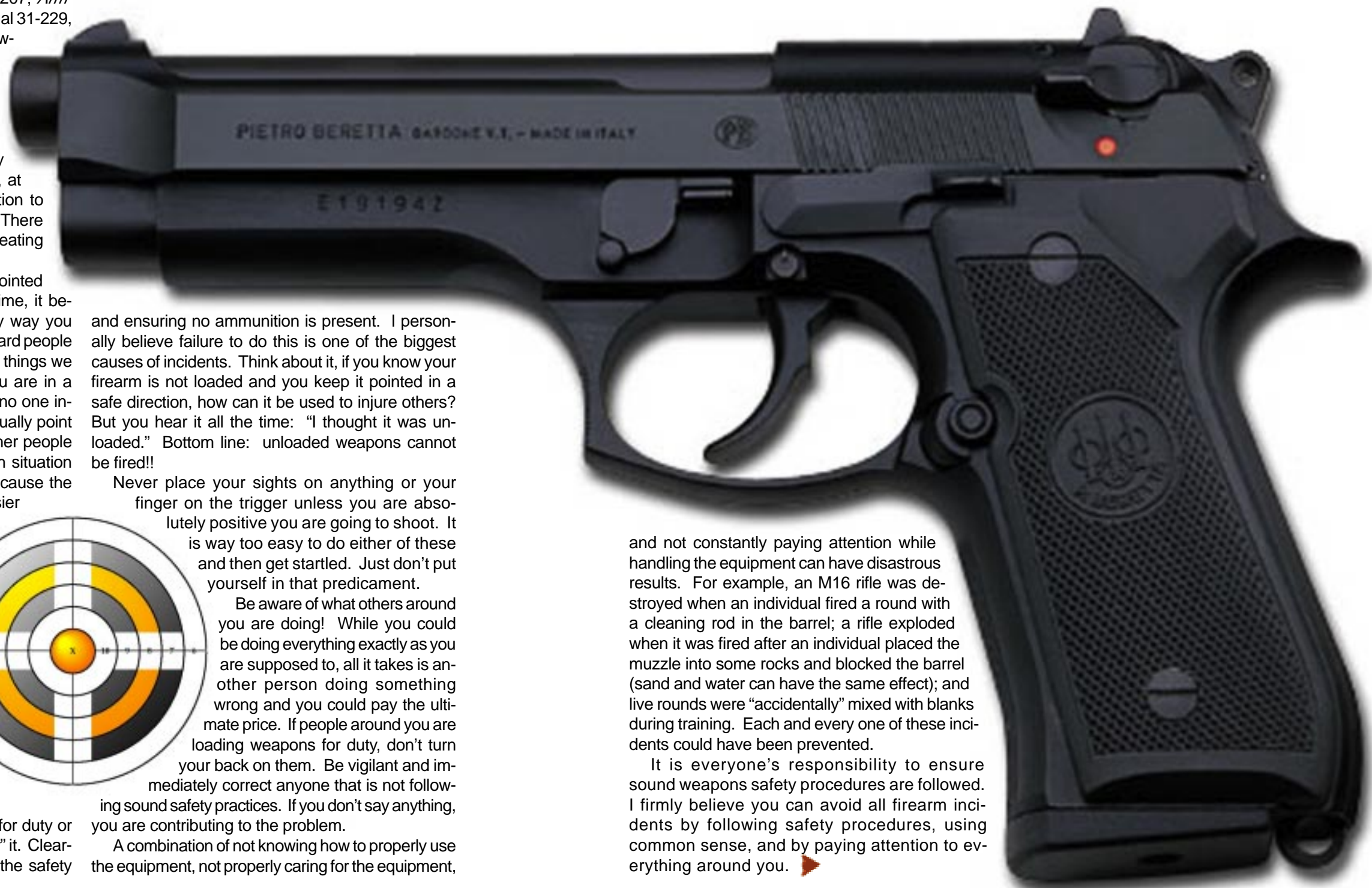
Never place your sights on anything or your finger on the trigger unless you are absolutely positive you are going to shoot. It is way too easy to do either of these and then get startled. Just don't put yourself in that predicament.

Be aware of what others around you are doing! While you could be doing everything exactly as you are supposed to, all it takes is another person doing something wrong and you could pay the ultimate price. If people around you are loading weapons for duty, don't turn your back on them. Be vigilant and immediately correct anyone that is not following sound safety practices. If you don't say anything, you are contributing to the problem.

A combination of not knowing how to properly use the equipment, not properly caring for the equipment,

Weapons Safety

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and not constantly paying attention while handling the equipment can have disastrous results. For example, an M16 rifle was destroyed when an individual fired a round with a cleaning rod in the barrel; a rifle exploded when it was fired after an individual placed the muzzle into some rocks and blocked the barrel (sand and water can have the same effect); and live rounds were "accidentally" mixed with blanks during training. Each and every one of these incidents could have been prevented.

It is everyone's responsibility to ensure sound weapons safety procedures are followed. I firmly believe you can avoid all firearm incidents by following safety procedures, using common sense, and by paying attention to everything around you. ▶